

Chapter 18

Canada—The Land of Milk and Honey

The last few weeks before we left for Canada went very quickly. It must have been because we were so busy. Most people went with a government subsidy. Not in our case. The government official who handled our case refused us a subsidy because we were leaving a good paying job and there was no need for us to emigrate from the Netherlands. He only granted subsidies to those who were unemployed or had no future in Holland.

When we were married, four years earlier, goods were very scarce and extremely high priced. In order to afford the fare for four people we had to sell off all of our beautiful furniture at a public auction. We only got about half of what we paid for it but it was enough to give us sufficient funds for the trip. If I remember correctly, it cost us about 7000 guilders.

We only took along the bare necessities such as clothing, kitchen utensils and blankets. That was all sent separately in a big box. We were amazed to see that people who had the subsidy could afford to take everything with them. It would take years before Grietje had decent furniture again. It was good that it lay hidden in the future.

We went with 5 other families, so we rented a bus to take us and our relatives to say a last farewell in Rotterdam. It must have been hard for father and mother Bos to watch their only two grandchildren leaving for Canada. They'd never see them again. I recall the trip to Rotterdam very vividly. It was a beautiful spring day, the 15th of March, 1951. Some cattle were already in the fields. Farmers were busy with their spring work.

That last farewell in Holland was very hard for some people. We all thought it was goodbye for life. Nobody knew the difference that improved air travel would make in the 1960s.

The boat we took was the old "Volendam," a former troop transport ship. It was now configured to make immigrant runs to Canada. Men, women, and children were separated right away into different quarters. Grietje had a small cabin all for herself and the boys and I were with a hundred other people in the bow of the ship (the roughest part). The bunks were all three or four high. It was exactly the same as a troop transport ship. We were packed in there like herring in a barrel. I don't know exactly how many immigrants were aboard but I think it was approximately 1500.

I clearly remember the coast and sand dunes of Holland slowly sinking in the distance. Farewell, country where my cradle once stood. Farewell, family,

friends, and so many memories, good and bad, happy times and very trying difficult times.

As soon as we were out of sight of land, Grietje became seasick. The sea was calm but nevertheless she was one of the first ones to become stricken. The 10-11 day trip was a complete nightmare for her. She couldn't eat or drink a thing during the whole time.

In the English Channel we started to speed up. The next morning we could see the white cliffs of Dover. After that we only saw the wide expanse of the ocean. There was nothing but water on each side.

Meals were always served in three sittings. The dining room couldn't hold all of us together. We were always in the same meal group. More and more people were missing their meals. We were hardly out on the ocean when hundreds of people became seasick. It didn't get any better either when the wind started blowing and the waves got higher and higher. Soon there was a severe storm. I can remember that the boys (they weren't seasick either) and I were the only ones in the dining room. My appetite increased by the day. I spent lots of time on deck and the sea wind and air must have increased my appetite.

Grietje, on the other hand, was sicker than a dog. When she started turning green I began to get worried. But the ship hands assured me that once she was back on land she'd be all right.

Soon we heard that the wind force was 9, hovering around 10. Those are hurricane force winds. I tied Lloyd and Jacob up in bed at night, otherwise they'd have fallen out.

The odour and smell in our sleeping quarters wasn't pleasant. The whole ship looked like a hospital. One night I went over to the crew's quarters because I knew a few people there. I couldn't believe how many sick sailors there were.

The waves would hit the bow of the ship with a thundering crash. The whole foredeck was buried in the sea sometimes and tons and tons of water came over it. There were lifelines all over the deck for the crew. Passengers were no longer allowed on deck.

One night, I crawled onto deck, roped myself onto a manila lifeline and took shelter behind a one and a half meter buildup over the foredeck. Time and again tons of water came crashing over my head without touching me. I had a great time and could see no danger. I was also a little foolish.

I was sleeping good and had a bigger appetite than ever. But I felt sorry for Grietje who was so sick. It was a mystery to me how she could survive without eating or drinking anything.

As we went on to the seventh and eighth days of the voyage, it continued to be very stormy, and there were very few healthy passengers. If this happened

in a nice ship like this, I can just imagine what it would have been like 100-150 years ago when immigrants crossed the ocean. A crossing in a sailing ship from Europe to the New World took at least 40-60 days. Passengers were bottled in cramped quarters below deck. Food and drinking water was sometimes horrible. The stink would have been awful. No wonder so many died on the voyages across the ocean.

I found out that an immigrant is an eternal optimist. I found this out best by listening to some of the conversations that others on the boat were having. I often thought that very few of them were being realistic. They were building a lot of castles in the air. Most were gentlemen farmers or big manufacturers in their dreams of the new country. Very few realized that years of hardship lay ahead. Many would see very little improvement over the positions they held in the old country. The realistic people all came from the rural areas, most of them were farmhands from large families. They were used to hard work and living poor. In later years I noticed that these were mostly the people who did well for themselves in Canada.

Lloyd and Jacob usually tagged along with me. Many times during the day, the girls of Mrs. Linde took care of them. Ali, who married H. Bosscher, was like a mother to them. I'd always rope them into bed at an early time. The sea air made them sleep like logs. The boys were never seasick and that was a great help.

I visited Grietje regularly but she was too sick even to talk. A few times I brought her out on the deck to get some fresh air but the sight of the heavy rolling waves only made her worse.

By the ninth and tenth days most people had recovered from their seasickness. But not Grietje. Finally on the morning of the eleventh day, a voice boomed over the ship, "Land ahoy! Land ahoy!" I got on the deck and watched as Canada slowly came into view. As if by magic, Grietje started to recover. She became her old self all of a sudden; it was unbelievable.

Around noon, we steamed into the port of Halifax and into the Volendam berth at pier 32. In the dining hall we got a sumptuous Dutch dinner of boerekool with rookworst. Grietje, who had last eaten in Rotterdam, ate for three. One plate after another. It was so much that I warned her to stop or she might get sick again. She must have eaten more than a whole rookworst and numerous plates of stamppot. Nothing would stop her. But she never got sick from it. She told me, "I'll never, ever, in my whole life cross that ocean again in a boat. I thought I'd die."

After our meal, we disembarked and our feet touched Canadian soil for the first time in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on March 26, 1951. We were first brought into a huge hall. Bedlam broke loose. Canadian customs officials talked to us in

English. Of course, we couldn't make much out of it. What chaos! There were a few Dutch officials in the building, but far too few.

Finally, all of our papers were carefully checked and we got tags which had our names and destinations. After that we were herded into groups, province by province, to the trains. By that time it was about 6:00. We got to our train and then we heard that the train wouldn't be leaving for several hours. On the train we had to buy our own food. And the prices were outrageously high. At least they seemed that way to us immigrants who didn't have very much in our pockets.

We were only allowed to take \$200 along. I bought another \$200 on the ship which was black market. But it was still not very much.

The Linde boys and I decided to sneak into town and buy some food. It was dangerous because the train could have taken off on us but life is full of risks. We came to a small grocery store where I bought milk, bread, butter and one big salami. Later on nobody would eat the salami because it was full of garlic. Anyway, when we came back the train was still there.

We now had time to inspect our train car a little closer. What we saw wasn't very encouraging. It must have been a car from the late 1800s or early 1900s. It had hard wooden benches. We each received a thin blanket. Above the benches were small wooden platforms for the children to sleep. Adults had to sleep on the benches. The small ones could curl up in the benches, but for most of us there was no room for that. The large families were especially in a bind. For women with babies and small children it was a nightmare. Some people were saying that we were transported in old cattle cars which had been modified for immigrant transport. One thing is for sure: the morale and optimism from the boat to Canada had sunk to a low level.

Every two cars had one big wood or coal stove on a platform between the cars. There was hardly any fuel available though. For many people who had come from a sheltered environment in the Netherlands, it was just like stepping into an ice cold shower.

Warming baby food was a nightmare. Unhappy babies only added to the confusion. As a family, we came through it all right. I was used to a rough and tumble life. Grietje was happy to be alive and on dry land. Lloyd and Jacob behaved themselves very well.

At about 10:00 at night the train started moving. There we went into our unknown future. But we knew that everywhere we went the Lord would be there. With Him we were always safe and He would guide us.

So it was farewell to Halifax. In October of 1989, nearly 40 years later, I visited Halifax again with Sylvia. We went back to the harbour, to pier 32.

Nothing had changed. When I arrived it was raining, and when I came back it was raining. I can still hear some of the Dutch sailors saying in 1951, "It's always raining in this city."

The hall which we stood in was still there on the waterfront. A short distance away, stood the railway siding where we boarded to go to the praries. Many thoughts went through my head. I came as a young man to these shores, and now I'm old, nearly 40 years have passed me by. My faithful wife who followed her idealistic and ambitious young man and made so many sacrifices is no longer with us. Although she was never enthusiastic about immigrating to this country, after a number of years she started to love Canada. But I also thought that the Lord in His goodness hadn't left me lonely, but gave me Sylvia, a woman whom Grietje would have wholeheartedly approved. A woman who has steered and guided me. As a whole I was thankful in my heart for what the Lord had given me.

Chapter 19

Canada—The Prairies and Life in Gadsby

Our journey finally started in the evening. We stared out of the windows into the dark night but we couldn't see very much of the landscape. We could see that it wasn't very inhabited. A couple of times we pulled into small stations along the route. Time and again we were amazed at how small the towns were and how far apart they were. We got our first glimpse of what seemed to a European mind to be an empty country.

At night it became cold in the cars. We all put on the coats which we had taken with us. Our children slept well, which gave us peace. The thin rags they gave us for blankets we folded over and placed on the children.

In the morning chaos and near riots nearly broke out around the stove. The wood was wet and there were 40-55 people from the two cars who wanted to warm something up to eat. But nobody knew how to light the fire. We were totally unprepared for it too. It was a monster of a stove, at least a half ton. The Dutch stoves were about a quarter of that. There was nobody who could explain it to us. We usually waited until the stove was going pretty good and everybody was done with it; that was usually around 10:30 or 11:00. There was a lot of smoke in the cars because someone had closed the wrong valve.

The diner car was only four or five cars away but nobody went there. We all had to hoard our dollars. It was what we did for the next 10-15 years.

By the break of dawn we got our first glimpse of our new country. I didn't like what I saw. Bush, rocks, wilderness, and here and there a small settlement.

After a whole night on the train, we sometimes saw a family moved off the train. It was because they had arrived at their destination. We then realized that we felt pretty safe in our big Dutch group, because with language problems we could always fall back on the safety of our big group. All of a sudden we realized that sooner or later we'd have to face the unknown alone.

Canada was still deep in winter. It was quite a contrast with Holland which was experiencing spring when we left.

I can still recall Quebec City high above the river. We were surprised that it looked like such an old city. But generally, we didn't see very much of towns and cities, we saw much more of the wide open expanses. We saw lots of rocks, rivers, and bush.

After Quebec City we passed through Ottawa, a sleepy town and much younger than Quebec. We were surprised that such a small town was the capital of Canada.

From there we went through Northern Ontario. By that time we had been on the train for about two and a half days. It was getting monotonous. It was often cold and there wasn't much food. Sometimes at the stations we'd buy a few sandwiches.

Fuel for the stoves was constantly in short supply. Sometimes we were completely out and could warm nothing. Once in Ontario, the train stopped in the middle of nowhere. Our car was stationed beside a kind of lumberyard which only lay a few hundred feet away. The Linde boys and I broke out of the car and fetched some nice long 2x4s which we dragged to our car. We went several times. We were in danger that the train would start moving and we would be left behind, but the need and cold was so great that we ignored that possibility. Lots of people watched us from the train. But no one dared to follow our example. We had nice firewood. Warm food for the babies and coffee for the adults. We had enough for the rest of the trip.

Our train was already a lot smaller than when we left from Halifax. Many immigrants stayed in Ontario and then we also left cars behind in between Quebec City and Ottawa.

Finally we arrived in Winnipeg on the Canadian Prairies. It was sure cold. It was the end of March but we had never experienced such cold temperatures or such a piercing wind. Someone told us that it was the coldest city in Canada. More immigrants left us in Winnipeg.

Soon the train went further. Then we got a really good look at the prairies. What a desolate world. No one had anticipated this. A lonely farmstead here and there, sometimes miles apart. Don't forget that we came from a country where neighbouring farmers could usually call out to each other.

Most people on the train were quiet and subdued. They were feeling fear, disappointment, and just generally sorry for themselves. You didn't hear any more about the great expectations which they had on the boat. Canada was different from what they had expected.

What about me? I didn't like the intense cold this far into spring. In Holland the farmers would have been in the field for two months already. Here it wouldn't start for another 6-8 weeks. The emptiness sure didn't scare me. In the Noord-Oost Polder, where I worked for 5 years, it was the same. An empty land. You get used to it and you learn to appreciate it.

There was also snow and more snow, sometimes two meters high. That was something else that I didn't particularly like. Later on I learned that the prairie farmers loved the snow, the more the better. No snow, no moisture, no crops; lots of snow, good crops.

As we went through the prairie provinces, we went through some fair sized

cities such as Brandon, Swift Current, Medicine Hat, and finally Lethbridge. This is where the Linde family left us. They were at their destination. All of a sudden we felt lonely. They were a large family of adults. The girls sometimes took care of our boys and as ex-Hasselters we always had something to talk about.

In Calgary we left the train and moved to a different train which would take us to Red Deer and eventually Gadsby, which was our destination. Our new train was a contrast with the old "cattle train." It had beautiful cars. We hardly dared to sit on the seats. The people were well-dressed and very clean. We were all dirty, grimy and smelly. No wonder though, we'd been on the train now for nearly 5 days with no water to wash, not even for the small babies.

We had our first real contact with Canadians on this train. They picked us out as immigrants right away and some ladies came over to talk with us. They were really friendly. It felt good after the rough treatment we received on the other train.

We had to wait for three hours in Red Deer. A Dutch family took us home and gave us a good warm meal.

We finally arrived in Gadsby around 4:00 in the afternoon. A farmer and his brother, who were both Dutch, picked us up at the train station. It was thawing there already. I've never seen so much mud in my life. To reach the car we had to wade through mud which was up to our ankles.

Our home wasn't ready yet so the farmer brought us to his home. His wife was on holidays while we were there. The house was a big mess and awfully dirty. Our entrance into the Canadian world wasn't a very good one. Most immigrants when they arrived after such a long journey (15-16 long days), received a warm festive meal from the farmer and a house to stay. Not here. There wasn't even a cup of tea or coffee. Nothing for the children either.

Grietje didn't know what to think anymore. And I, I thought, "What have I led my family and brave wife into?" In Holland we had a nice cozy and respectable life and now things looked really tough.

A half hour after we arrived I was milking seven cows by hand. After that I did chores for a couple of hours. Grietje then had a meal ready for us. It was hard for her. A strange house, strange foods, strange labels which she couldn't read. But anyway we had something to eat. Following our meal we tumbled into bed.

The same thing took place the next morning. One thing that was good was the food. The farmer liked hearty foods, meats, and sausages. He was a professional butcher so he knew how to make those kind of things.

The work wasn't too bad. I enjoyed it. We had 100 beef cows, 100 fattening

steer, 10 milk cows, 200 pigs, and 640 acres of land. The cows started calving in the middle of a blizzard. We spent day and night in the bush trying to catch the wet calves to keep them from freezing to death. We went in with a team of horses and a stoneboat. There was lots of whiskey on the stoneboat for the calves, but I quite often took a gulp myself. I needed it as much as the calves. The farmer never said a word about it, even though he went through quite a bit of whiskey. But we never lost a calf in five days. Some farmers had lost 20-30% of their calves.

Grietje complained about how everything she touched in the house was greasy and how there was many years worth of dirt on everything. It must have been a nightmare for her.

I liked the life very much. The farmer was kind of a tightwad though and he often complained how he had to pay me so much money (\$75/month, a starvation wage). But he'd boast to other people how he had such a good man who knew all kinds of farming and farm work.

After a couple of weeks, our house in town was empty and ready for us to move in. Our box full of essentials had arrived and we moved to town. We had a house with 4 rooms, a square box of a house. It was quite roomy, but there was dirt everywhere.

Gadsby was a town of 3-400 people. There was one community water pump in the middle of town. The well was deep and the water had to be hand pumped which was hard work.

Grietje went to work cleaning the house. She made some hot soapy water and after one day's scrubbing the kitchen already smelled better. It also looked a lot better. Her pleasure was short lived. That night the farmer came over and told us how a group of women had been complaining to him about how the Dutch lady used too much water and soon the town would be without water. Water had to be used very sparingly. Grietje told me that she only used five or six pails, and she would have used more if the pump had been right beside the house. It was quite a shock to a Dutch woman who was used to having water right at her fingertips. Handpumps went out in the '30s in Holland, and all Dutch kitchens had taps. At first Grietje felt a little down, but by next morning she was melting snow and only used a few pails of water each day. The house became sparkling clean.

In front of our house was a big barn with 30 acres of pasture. I rented the barn and I bought 20 pigs and a big pile of grain from the mayor of Gadsby. The sale went kind of funny. The mayor asked for \$300 for the lot, and I offered \$12 a piece. He needed a piece of paper and while to figure out what that came to in total. No deal. Then I offered \$13. He thought about it and finally agreed on \$13 a piece. My farmer later told me that it was unusual to

agree on a piece price because Canadians were so poor at doing math.

When the snow was finally gone, the threshing gangs came out. Nearly the whole crop from last year was still standing in the fields. Neighbours helped neighbours. There would be one crew of six men on the threshing machine and six men with a team of horses and a wagon.

We'd wake up at 4:00 in the morning and we'd take an hour to feed, water, and harness the horses. It was sometimes chaos. Nothing was orderly, you grabbed what suited you best and tried not to be the last one out. Of course, this was just a temporary setup.

The breakfasts we were given were incredible. I have never seen so much food and such a variety. Mind you, I wasn't used to eating a big meal in the morning, so I ate very little. The other fellows knew what was coming and ate unbelievably large quantities of food.

The work went fine. I could keep up with the crowd. But by 10:00 or 11:00 I was looking for a cup of coffee. Nothing came. Nothing at 12:00 either. I felt faint. There was nothing to eat or drink and it was hot. It was about 3:30 before another meal came. I sure ate then.

By that time my hands were raw. During the day I got blisters on my hands that were as big as eggs; all from loading and unloading wagons with a pitchfork. The blisters had broken and there was blood and water streaming down the pitchfork. My hands were a bloody mess. Somebody in the crowd noticed and suddenly all the attention was focussed on me. Everyone was in awe. You can imagine what it was like; here were hands that hadn't done heavy work in years, they'd become nice and soft, and then a gruelling hard day's work of loading and unloading. My farmer advised me to go home, but I refused. I'd stick to it to the bitter end no matter what the cost. Besides, I had to get used to this kind of work. So I thought the sooner I got through this, the better. I refused to be considered a failure.

By 10:30 at night I was home again. Grietje was terrified when she saw my hands. That night I slept like a log. But before I knew it, 4:00 had rolled around again.

One bonus was that I found quite a few duck eggs. The ducks had laid them under the stocks. It was a little extra work but the pigs loved the treats which I brought for them from the fields. Sometimes I could fill a five gallon pail full of eggs.

After three or four days my hands started to heal and I could work like anyone else. I could also eat like anyone else at breakfast time.

The nicest part of threshing was that we could be paid an extra \$6 a day. I did it for fourteen days so I managed to make a little extra money.

Of course, we didn't thresh on Sundays. Then I just did my chores. We had many sermons from Holland with us which we would read through. We hated Sundays in Gadsby. For most people it was just another work day. The minister from the United Church there, worked harder on Sundays than any other day of the week. I seen it happen more than once where there was no service on Sunday evening because of the work practices of the minister. My farmer pointed that out to me in the beginning, he said, "If the minister works on Sunday, why don't you? Are you better than him?" When I told him that I'd never do work on Sundays other than the necessary chores, he quit talking about it.

I really enjoyed the field work with the tractor. It never bothered me to be all alone on the prairie. Lots of fresh air. What we really missed was congregational and Sunday life.

Our farmer was quite easy to work for. He had never had good, experienced farm hands, time and again he would be asking for my advice on things. But when you started talking money with him, then you hit his very soul. That was the love of his life. Not his wife or children.

His brother who lived nearby, was entirely different. He came over a lot and did a lot for us. What a contrast between the two brothers.

I needed ground up grain for the pigs; both barley and oats mixed. Many farmers sold it. I asked my farmer and he told me that it would be three cents a pound. I asked his brother when he came over that night and he said that everyone else was buying it from my farmer at two cents a pound.

My farmer also did butchering and one time I asked him how much it would be for a half hog and he told me \$35. His brother came over and told me that everyone else was paying \$17.50. So my boss was trying to make money off my meagre wages.

I asked him once for a raise. "I'll think about it," he said. He went to the grocery store in town to find out how much Grietje spent on groceries in one month. What he didn't know was that she sometimes went to another store. Was Grietje ever furious when she heard about that! I've never seen her so mad as when I told her about that. He decided that we didn't need a raise because we were easily able to live on \$75 a month.

That did it. I decided to leave. The government had made me sign a one year contract and I would have kept to it if I had been given decent treatment. But every day I was being cheated out of money which I'd worked hard for. He never paid me for the threshing that I did. The custom was that as soon as the threshing was done, the farmer would pay his workers. I was told that by his brother who also spoke Dutch and was a fine, honest man. For my \$75 a month

I worked hard from 4:30 in the morning until 9:30 in the evening. They were quite long days but it was seeding time and I have no objections to long hard days, even though I rarely saw my family during the weekdays. I missed my little boys very much. Life was so much different from a few months ago when I worked for the police force in Holland.

In the meantime, we were seeking contact with the church groups in Edmonton and Lethbridge. We heard from Lethbridge that there was no work except in the beet fields. Beet fields were most suitable for large families and it was only temporary work. I was looking for a steady farm job.

We didn't hear anything at all from Edmonton. We shouldn't forget that the people there were also recent immigrants who didn't really know the country. After we made the decision to leave Gadsby, Grietje left to hitch-hike to Edmonton and talk to the people of the congregation there. Our farmer's brother took care of the boys. He was a great help in everything.

I still don't know how Grietje found the courage to make that trip all by herself. She hardly knew even ten words of English. And hitch-hiking too. Hitch-hiking wasn't as dangerous at that time as it is now. Still it wasn't easy. This trip certainly showed what kind of a woman Grietje was.

She was back in four days and had a good trip. People were very helpful and friendly in giving her rides. She had talked with some people in Edmonton who would look around for us. But she told me that the economic situation there was quite bad. There was lots of unemployment. She warned against getting our hopes up too high.

Weeks dragged on and we didn't hear anything from Edmonton. Soon it was the end of the month. I was planning to leave with my payment for the month and not risk having worked a whole month for nothing. I decided to leave at this time. It was the last day of May in 1951. I was full of confidence that I'd be able to find a place close to Edmonton.

The farmer paid me, but he still didn't pay me the money for the threshing work. At first he acted stupid, but when he realized that I knew all about his little game he finally relented and paid me. After I had the money safely in my pocket, I told him that I wouldn't be coming back. At first he got angry and threatened to call the RCMP. When I told him that I liked the work but I hated the way he was cheating me out of my meagre wages, he started crying and offered me \$100 per month. I could have gotten more but I knew that he'd try to get even with me, one way or another. He was just that kind of man.

In a way, I felt sorry for him. To have money as your only goal in life is a terrible thing. In the end he offered to drive me to town and we parted as good friends.

After more than 40 years, you sometimes wonder about what you did. Should I have stayed on for a year? I didn't think so then and I don't think so now. He totally humiliated us by going to the grocery store. I was angry, but not like Grietje, who was ready to spit on the man. But don't forget that in the early years, immigrants were not always welcomed by the citizens of this country. We were looked down upon as "DPs" or displaced persons. We should be happy to just have some food in our bellies. Society tried to keep us at a low social level.

For instance, if the man of the family became disabled or couldn't work for any reason, his family could be sent back to their country of origin. It was cruel but that's the way it went. The rule was in existence for many years.

Of course, it wouldn't be fair to say that everybody was that heartless. Some were kind and helpful and remembered the stories told by their immigrant forefathers. Nowadays some people still have a bad attitude towards immigrants. But you always have to remember that you too were once a stranger in this land.

So here we were, unemployed in a strange land. A few days after quitting at the farm we hired a truck to take us to Edmonton, and it was farewell Gadsby. Looking back, could we have done things differently? I don't think so. The way the farmer turned out to be wasn't necessarily a bad thing. We were still young and the danger of settling down in one place too quickly was very great. Hundreds, maybe thousands, have been estranged from their faith that way. We both felt very strongly about that and it was ultimately the deciding factor. Our Christian, Calvinist heritage should be preserved at all costs.